

The Casualties of Culture Shock

Why Anti-Gringo Winds Often Blow South of the Border

One of my most vivid memories of South America is that of a man with a golf club—a five-iron, if memory serves—driving golf balls off a penthouse terrace in Cali, Colombia. He was a tall Britisher; and had what the British call “a stylish pot” instead of a waistline. Beside him on a small patio table was a long gin-and-tonic, which he refilled from time to time at the nearby bar.

He had a good swing, and each of his shots carried low and long out over the city. Where they fell, neither he nor I nor anyone else on the terrace that day had the vaguest idea. The penthouse, however, was in a residential section on the edge of the Rio Cali, which runs through the middle of town. Somewhere below us, in the narrow streets that are lined by the white adobe blockhouses of the urban peasantry, a strange hall was rattling on the roofs—golf balls, “old practice duds,” so the Britisher told me, that were “hardly worth driving away.”

In the weeks that followed, when I became more aware of the attitude a good many Colombians have towards that nation's Anglo-Saxon population, I was glad nobody had traced the source of those well-hit mashes. Colombians, along with their Venezuelan neighbors, may well be the most violent people on the continent, and a mixture of insult and injury does not rank high as a national dish.

Concept of Noblesse Oblige

It is doubtful that the same man would drive golf balls off a rooftop apartment in the middle of London. But it is not really surprising to see it done in South America. There, where the distance between the rich and the poor is so very great, and where Anglo-Saxons are automatically among the elite, the concept of noblesse oblige is subject to odd interpretations.

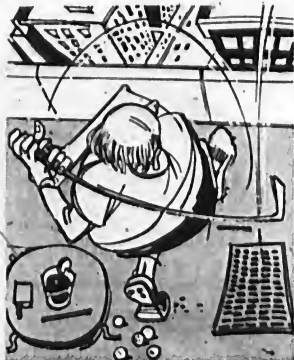
The attitude, however, does not go unnoticed; the natives consider it bad form indeed for a foreigner to stand on a rooftop and drive golf balls into their midst. Perhaps they lack sporting blood, or maybe a sense of humor, but the fact is that they resent it, and it is easy to see why they might go to the polls at the next opportunity and vote for the man who prom-

ises to rid the nation of “arrogant gringo imperialists.”

Whether the candidate in question is a fool, a thief, a Communist, or even all three does not matter much when emotions run high—and few elections south of the Rio Grande are won on the basis of anything but blatant appeals to popular emotion.

An Emotional Question

The North American presence in South America is one of the most emotional political questions on the continent. In most countries, especially Argentina and Chile, there is a considerable European presence as well. But with recent history as it is, when the winds of anti-gringo opinion begin to blow, they blow due north, toward



the United States, which to the Latin American is more easily identifiable with capitalism and imperialism than any other country in the world.

With this in mind, a traveler in South America gets one shock after another at the stance generally taken by his fellow gringos—and sometimes a worse shock at the stance he takes himself. One young American put it this way: “I came down here a real gung-ho liberal, I wanted to

get close to these people and help them—but in six months I turned into a hard-nosed conservative. These people don't know what I'm talking about, they won't help themselves, and all they want is my money. All I want to do now is get out.”

It is a sad fact that living for any length of time in a Latin American country has a tendency to do this to many Americans. To avoid it takes tremendous adaptability, idealism, and faith in the common future.

Take the example of a young man named John, a representative in a Latin American country for an international relief organization. His work consists mainly in distributing surplus food to the poor. He works hard, often going out on field trips for three or four days of rough driving, bad food, primitive living, and dysentery.

Sells Food to Speculators

But the people he has to work with bother him. He can't understand why the principal of a back-country school will steal food earmarked for the pupils and sell it to speculators. He can't understand why his warehouse—lying in the middle of a district where food is distributed regularly—is constantly being looted by the very people who were standing in line the week before to get their regular share.

He broods on these things and wonders if he is really accomplishing anything, or just being taken for a sucker. Then, one day when he is in a particularly bad mood over some new evidence of callousness or corruption, he hears below his window the shouting of a mob. A man is standing on the steps of a fountain, shouting hoarsely about “the rights of the people” and what should be done to secure them. And the crowd happily roars an answer—“down with the capitalist swine!”

Our man, standing at his window, suddenly loses his temper and shakes his fist. *¡Abajo del pueblo!* he yells. Meaning, “Down with the people.” Then he quickly ducks back inside.

But the Latin family next door, standing at their window, hears the gringo abusing the crowd. Word gets around, and several days later our man is insulted as he walks to the corner cantina for a pack of *cigarillos*. He speaks good Spanish, and

curses back, not understanding why his neighbors are no longer friendly. But it makes him even more bitter, and once the tide starts running in that direction, it is hard to reverse.

A New Man in Town

One day a new American appears in town, a trainee for one of the United States banks that have branches in South America. Our man John meets him at the Anglo-American Club and, in the course of conversation, tells him what to expect from the nationals—“a bunch of rotten ingrates, stupid and corrupt to the last man.”

The newcomer hears other gringos say the same kind of thing. At night, in his new and unfamiliar apartment, he begins to think the neighbors are making noise on purpose, to wear on his nerves. Soon he is as bitter as most of the others.

When the inevitable bank strike comes along—as it does at regular intervals in most Latin American countries—our newcomer takes the advice of an older gringo employee and shows up at work with a pistol, which he puts on his desk like a paperweight to show the employees he means business.

The reaction of the nationals hardly needs to be cataloged. Our trainee is chalked up as one more bit of two-legged evidence that gringos are vicious fools. The net result—as far as both John and the young banker are concerned—is a grievous setback for the hope that North and South America will come to understand each other, and thus avoid a split-up that would wreck the Western Hemisphere.

The young American in a Latin American country faces other hazards. For one thing, he has to contend with the American colony that blooms in every city of any size.

Americans living in Latin American countries are often more snobbish than the Latins themselves. The typical American has quite a bit of money by Latin American standards, and he rarely sees a countryman who doesn't. An American businessman who would think nothing of being seen in a sport shirt on the streets of his home town will be shocked and of-

fended at a suggestion that he appear in Rio de Janeiro, for instance, in anything but a coat and tie. The same man—often no more than 30 years old—might have been living in a prefabricated tract house in the States, but in Rio he will live on Copacabana beach with two maids, servants' quarters, and a balcony overlooking the sea.

Some people say that the American is fouling his own image in South America—that instead of being a showpiece for “democracy,” he not only tends to ape the wealthy, anti-democratic Latins, but sometimes beats them at their own game. Suddenly finding himself among the elite, the nervous American is determined to hold his own—and, unlike the genuine aristocrat who never doubts his own worth, the newcomer to status seeks to prove it at every turn.

Discipline or Anarchy?

Others, though, repeat the old, familiar, “When in Rome, do as the Romans do.” In South America, so the thinking goes, the lower classes have no grasp of equality and take informality for weakness. So the only alternative is to make them respect you. “I know it's silly to shout at the maid every time she makes a mistake,” said one American housewife in Brazil. “But she's lazy and I want her to know I'm watching her. With these people, it's either discipline or anarchy.”

Another problem that plagues the gringo is drink. Because he never really feels at home in a foreign language; because his income is usually embarrassingly large by local standards; because he worries continually about being cheated whenever he buys anything; because he never gets over the feeling that most upper-class Latins consider him a boob from a country where even the boobs are rich; and because he can never understand why people don't seem to like him for what he is—just a good guy who feels a bit out of place among these strange surroundings and customs—because of all these tensions and many more of the same kind, he tends to drink far more than he does at home.

“To relax” is the usual excuse, but

sometimes there is almost no choice. In Rio, for instance, the evening traffic jams are so bad that getting from the business district out to Copacabana—where “everybody” lives—is almost impossible between the hours of 5 and 8. One of the first things a new arrival is told is: “If you can't get out of town by five, forget about it and settle down to serious drinking until eight.” This hiatus in the day is termed “the drinking hour.”

With many people, the “drinking hour” soon becomes a necessary habit. Sometimes it leads to disaster. Often an American will arrive home broke and bleary-eyed at 3 or 4 in the morning, still juggling his briefcase and cursing the long-gone traffic.

Because of things like the drinking hour and other, purely local, situations, a man returning to the States after a stay in Latin America is often struck dumb by the question, “What can we do about that place?”

Seldom Time to Relax

He has no idea, because he has never had time enough to relax and give it much thought. His concern has been survival. Objectivity is one of the first casualties of “culture shock”—a term for the malady that appears when a North American, with his heritage of Puritan pragmatism, suddenly finds himself in a world with different traditions and a different outlook on life.

It is an odd feeling to return from a year in South America and read a book by some expense-account politician who toured the continent in six weeks and spoke only with presidents, cabinet ministers, and other “leading figures” like himself. The problems and the issues suddenly become quite clear—as they never were when you were right there in the midst of them.

Now, looking back on that man with the golf club, it is easy to see him as a fool and a beast. But I recall quite well how normal it seemed at the time, and how surprised I would have been if any of the dozen people on the terrace had jumped up to protest.

—HUNTER S. THOMPSON